Using Fables

By George V. Helfrich (Belize)

I imagine all teachers are looking for the ideal lesson, one that's interesting and enjoyable and allows students the opportunity to practice a variety of skills. I found such a lesson when I used fables as a means of giving ESL students the chance to work with one of the more troublesome aspects of subject-verb agreement and to analyze, evaluate, and create language on their own.

I am a second-year Peace Corps volunteer teaching in the English program at The University College of Belize, the country's only university. Though English is the official language of Belize and UCB students have studied standard English in primary and secondary school, the country is actually multilingual and the students speak another language-Spanish, Maya, Garifuna, or Creole-outside the classroom. Because of this, many have problems with subject-verb agreement and the addition of "s" in the third person present tense.

Five Aesop's Fables Rewritten

In January 1992 I was teaching a lesson on present-tense agreement in a remedial English course. Knowing how ineffective simply explaining the rule governing the third person would be, I wanted to work with some examples of subjects matched with verbs in actual pieces of writing. Not finding any short, enjoyable texts written in the present tense that would be appropriate for my students, I rewrote five of Aesop's fables, changing the past tense to the present.

I started the 90-minute class with a review of the grammar rule and then introduced the texts with an open question, "Are you familiar with fables?" Some of the students were, but many were not. Next, I gave the students copies of the ones I had rewritten and we read them out loud. After reading, we spent about 30 minutes isolating each subject and verb and looking at the agreement between them ("An old man on the point of death summons . . .").

Analyzing Fables

After this grammar work, we analyzed the fables for common characteristics to use as the basis for a definition. The class finally defined fables as "very short narratives, usually using animals as characters, that teach a lesson."

This aspect of "teaching a lesson" led to a discussion on how fables should be written and what value exists in reading them. Two of the fables had morals attached to their endings, but three did not, and the question arose as to which is the "better" way to write. Some students said that the moral should be explicitly stated to insure that the readers learn the desired lesson. Others said that the moral should be left implicit, that the stories should challenge the readers, make them read carefully and think. The discussion focused on "The Eagle and the Arrow," because none of the students discovered Aesop's intended moral ("We are often the source of our own

destruction."). All the students agreed that implanting the moral requires careful writing. Writers may write fairly loose stories if they are going to tell the readers the lesson; but they must write tight ones if they expect their readers to get the moral on their own.

This discussion led to another on the value of reading and writing fables. I offered Augustine's view that "as a boy [he] sinned when [he] preferred those inane tales to more useful studies" (Confessions 1.13). Some students agreed, saying that they are interested in materials that will help them get better jobs. (Like studying subject-verb agreement, so let's get on with it.) Others said that they enjoy less practical, more intellectual, work. The ensuing debate focused on the question of whether school should be vocational or educational. The issue is particularly relevant in Belize, a developing nation with limited resources. Should place be given only to immediately useful subjects, or is there room for liberal arts?

A Writing Lesson

That night for homework I asked students to select a Belizean proverb and to do some prewriting on a fable that embodies it. They then spent most of the next two classes writing and rewriting their fables, both alone and in workshop. The students wrote in the present tense, and many filled their stories with local animals and characters from Belizean folklore. Most important, though, during this work they really understood the process of writing: identifying a central idea and then composing and recomposing an organized, developed text to bring it out. We had discussed and used this method before when writing a variety of paragraphs, and worked from major idea to topic sentence to supporting details. But I think the straightforwardness of choosing a proverb and fashioning an illustrative story around it-with appropriate setting, characters, and plot-clarified this previously hazy process.

An Encouraging Reception

When I first thought to use fables as part of the class I was concerned that the students would find the material childish. Instead, the students took to the subject and looked at it more enthusiastically than I had anticipated.

Here are the fables as I rewrote them:

THE BUNDLE OF STICKS
An old man on the point of death summons his sons around him to give them some parting advice. He orders his servants to bring in a faggot of sticks, and says to his oldest son: "Break it." The son strains and strains, but with all his efforts he is unable to break the bundle. The other sons try also, but none of them is successful. "Untie the faggots," says the father, "and each of you take a stick." When they have done so, he calls out to them "Now break," and each breaks his stick easily. "You see my meaning," says the father.
Moral: "Strength in Unity."

THE EAGLE AND THE ARROW

An eagle is soaring through the air when suddenly it hears the whiz of an arrow and feels itself wounded to death. Slowly it flutters down to earth, with its life-blood pouring out of it. Looking down upon the arrow in its breast, the eagle sees the haft is feathered with one of its own plumes. "Alas," it cries, and dies.

THE FOUR OXEN AND THE LION

A lion prowls about the field in which four oxen dwell. He tries to attack them; but whenever he comes near, they turn their tails to one another, so that whichever way he approaches he is met by the horns of one of them. At last, though, the oxen quarrel among themselves, and go off to separate corners of the pasture. Then the lion attacks them one by one.
Moral: "United We Stand, Divided We Fall."

THE COCK AND THE PEARL

A cock is strutting up and down the farmyard when suddenly he sees something shining in the straw. "That's for me!" he cries and quickly roots it from the yard. What does it turn out to be but a pearl. "You may be a treasure to men," says the cock, "but I would rather have a single barley-corn."

THE OLD MAN AND DEATH

An old man, bent double with age and toil, is gathering sticks in the forest. At last he grows so tired and hopeless that he cries out, "I cannot bear this life any longer. I wish death would take me."

But as he speaks, Death appears and says, "I hear you call. What do you wish?"

"Please, sir," replies the cutter, "help me lift this bundle of sticks."